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# Incised Glass Vessels from the Umayyad and Abbasid–Fatimid Periods at Bet Shean, Israel

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*Twenty-two vessels—incised glass beakers, bowls, and one bottle—made of dark blue, yellowish green, yellowish brown, olive, and dark purple glass and dated to the Umayyad and Abbasid–Fatimid periods were discovered at Bet Shean in the excavations conducted by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem expedition, headed by Gideon Foerster and Yoram Tsafrir, in 1980–1981 and 1986–1997.<sup>1</sup> Two sherds are from the Umayyad period, and twenty vessels or fragments are dated to the Abbasid–Fatimid periods. Twenty vessels will be presented in this article, while the other two are very small fragments. The beakers and bowls are deep and have straight or rounded walls. The bottle, complete except for its neck, is very similar in its geometric designs to the other vessels, and apparently all the vessels from Bet Shean were made in one workshop.*

Incised glass vessels start to appear at Bet Shean in the Umayyad period, but they are more widespread in the Abbasid–Fatimid periods. Most of the published vessels, including those from Bet Shean, are decorated with simple geometric designs, but there are a few vessels decorated with other types of ornamentation. For example, there is a fragment decorated with fish in the Benaki Museum (Clairmont 1977: 75–77). One bowl ornamented with a floral design is in the National Museum of Syria in Damascus (al-ʿUsh 1971: 203), and a goblet decorated with geometric designs and the Kufic inscription, “Blessings from Allah to its owner al-Kasir (?) the lord,” is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Clairmont 1972: 145–46; Jenkins 1986: 18–19, no. 16).

Two sherds from the Umayyad period and twenty vessels from the Abbasid–Fatimid periods were discovered at Bet Shean.

## THE INCISED GLASS VESSELS

### *The Umayyad Period*

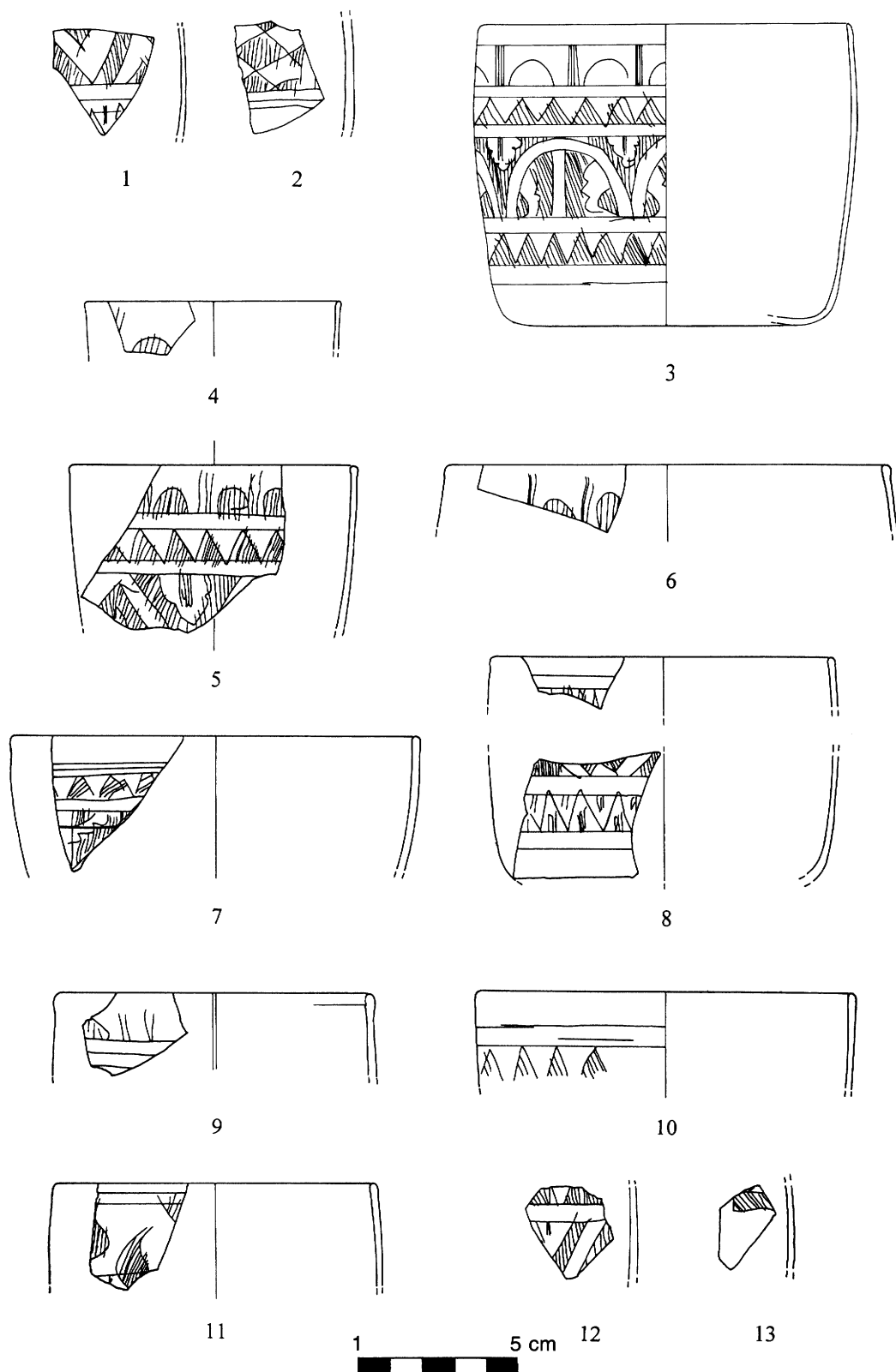
Two fragments of bowls or beakers made of dark blue and olive glass were found (fig. 1:1–2). They

are decorated with lozenges and triangles. The only parallel from this period was uncovered at Susa in Stratum 3, which is dated to 700–750 (Hardy-Guibert 1984: 143–44, fig. 32:1, pl. 6:7).

The two sherds from Bet Shean were discovered together with pottery and glass vessels from the Umayyad period.

### *The Abbasid–Fatimid Periods*

Beakers, bowls, and one almost complete bottle from these periods were found. All the beakers and bowls are deep and have straight walls, except for one bowl with rounded walls (figs. 1:3–13, 2, 4:14–19). The walls are divided into friezes; in each one there is a different decoration: half circles and lines between them, intertwined triangles, and undefined designs. In most cases the circles and triangles are filled with lines. Three sherds (figs. 1:13, 4:14–15) differ in their decorations from the other vessels (parts of the Kufic inscription?). In one beaker, part of the decorated base is also preserved (fig. 4:19). Most of the vessels are made of dark blue glass, while a few are made of yellowish green, yellowish brown, olive, and dark purple glass.



**Fig. 1.** Incised glass vessels from Bet Shean. Cat. Nos. 1–2: Fragments of Umayyad-period bowls or beakers; 3–13: Abbasid–Fatimid beakers and bowls.



Fig. 2. Photo of cat. no. 3 (see also fig. 1:3).

Other incised glass beakers and bowls from these periods have been found in Palestine at Nessana (Harden 1962: 80, pl. 20:20) and Hammat Gader (Lester 1997: 437–39, no. 14). In Jordan they have been discovered at Pella (O’Hea 1992: 259, not illustrated) and Aqaba (Whitcomb 1987: 264, fig. 8b). A few vessels were found at Fustāt (Scanlon 1974: 84–85, pl. 32, fig. 5b; Scanlon 1984: 35, fig. 58; Shindo 1992: 316, fig. 6:21–23). A few sherds were discovered at al-Ṭūr in south Sinai (Kawatoko 1995: 54, pl. 36:2–3), and one sherd was found at Manda in Kenya (Morrison 1984: 163, fig. 131e). Only one fragment was found at al-Mina (Lane 1937: 67–68, fig. 12G). A few incised vessels were discovered at Samarra, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate between 836 and 892 (Lamm 1928: 79–82, nos. 251–55, 259). Other vessels from Iraq were found at Tulūl al Ḥaiḍir (Finster and Schmidt 1976: 139, fig. 67f–g) and Nippur (Meyer 1996: 249, fig. 4:168). In Iran two incised vessels from these periods were uncovered at Susa (Lamm 1931: 366, pl. 77:2; Kervran 1984: 215, fig. 8:19), and two shallow plates were found at Nishapur (Kröger 1995: 116–19). Six shallow plates, two of which show gilding in the incised lines, were uncovered in the crypt of the Famen Temple in China, which was sealed in 874 (Jiayao 1991: 123–24, figs. 3–8). At Corinth one sherd was found at the Agora South Center factory (Davidson 1952: 88, no. 748),

and one sherd was also discovered at Dvin, the capital of Muslim Armenia (Djanpoladian and Kalantarian 1988: pl. 27:15). The other published vessels are in museums and private collections.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned above, one incised bottle was also discovered at Bet Shean (figs. 3, 4:20). The bottle is made of dark blue glass, from which most of the bowls and beakers were made, and is decorated in the same way, with geometric designs (triangles and half circles filled with lines). On the shoulder, around the missing neck, and near the base it is decorated with a string of small circles filled with lines. Based on the way the neck was broken, it seems to have been a very narrow neck. A crude ring base was added to the bottle after it was made.

Comparable published pieces include one sherd from a bottle discovered at Samarra (Lamm 1928: 82, no. 257), and five jugs and bottles in museums and private collections. A jug said to come from Nishapur is in a private collection in Paris; the jug is decorated with geometric designs and carries the Kufic inscription, “work of Fayruz al-‘Almili” (Loudmer and Kevorkian 1985: 246). A jug said to come from Raqqa in Syria is in the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne (Rütti 1981: 134, no. 585). A bottle said to come from Nishapur is in the Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf (Kröger 1998: 10, fig. 3.5). A bottle similar to the previously mentioned one is in the Corning Museum of Glass (*Journal of Glass Studies* 11 [1969]: 112, no. 20); and according to Clairmont (1977: 75, n. 1), there is an incised perfume-flask in a private collection in Lucerne.

All the beakers and bowls from Bet Shean were found in contexts dated to the mid-8th to 11th centuries. Some (cat. nos. 4–5, 8, 11–12) were discovered in the Abbasid quarter that was built over the ruins of the earthquake of 749 (Tsafir and Foerster 1997: figs. C, D, 48). These were found together with pottery and clay lamps from these periods and with a two-part bottle made of colorless and purple glass, a turquoise mosaic glass bowl, many pinch-decorated and mold-blown vessels, glass lamps (Hadad 1998), and other plain glass vessels typical of these periods. The best-preserved bowl, illustrated in figs. 1:3 and 2, was found near the Central Monument, together with pottery from these periods and Umayyad coins that were in use also in the Abbasid period. The beaker with the decorated base (fig. 4:19) was discovered in the eastern bathhouse, along with glass vessels from the Abbasid–Fatimid periods, including a two-part beaker made of blue and yellow glass, and pinch-decorated vessels. The bottle was found



Fig. 3. Photo of cat. no. 20 (see also fig. 4:20).

in a structure built in the arena, but not in a clear stratigraphic context that would allow it to be dated. On the basis of its considerable resemblance to the bowls and beakers—especially to numbers 3, 5, and the base of 19—it may be dated, like the beakers and bowls, to the mid-8th to 11th centuries.

## DISCUSSION

### *Steatite and Clay Bowls*

Incised decoration appears not only in glass vessels but also in steatite and black burnished clay bowls. These steatite and clay bowls are either shallow or deep and have straight walls; sometimes they have ledge handles. While the glass vessels presented above are decorated only with geometric designs, a few of the Bet Shean clay bowls are decorated with both geometric and zoomorphic designs (figs. 5: 21–25; 6), and a few steatite bowls are decorated only with geometric designs (fig. 5:26–30). A comparable black ceramic bowl bears an incised depiction of a Torah Shrine from Nabratein in Upper Galilee, and other, similar vessels made both from clay and steatite from other sites have been dated by Magness (1994) to the late Umayyad and Abbasid periods

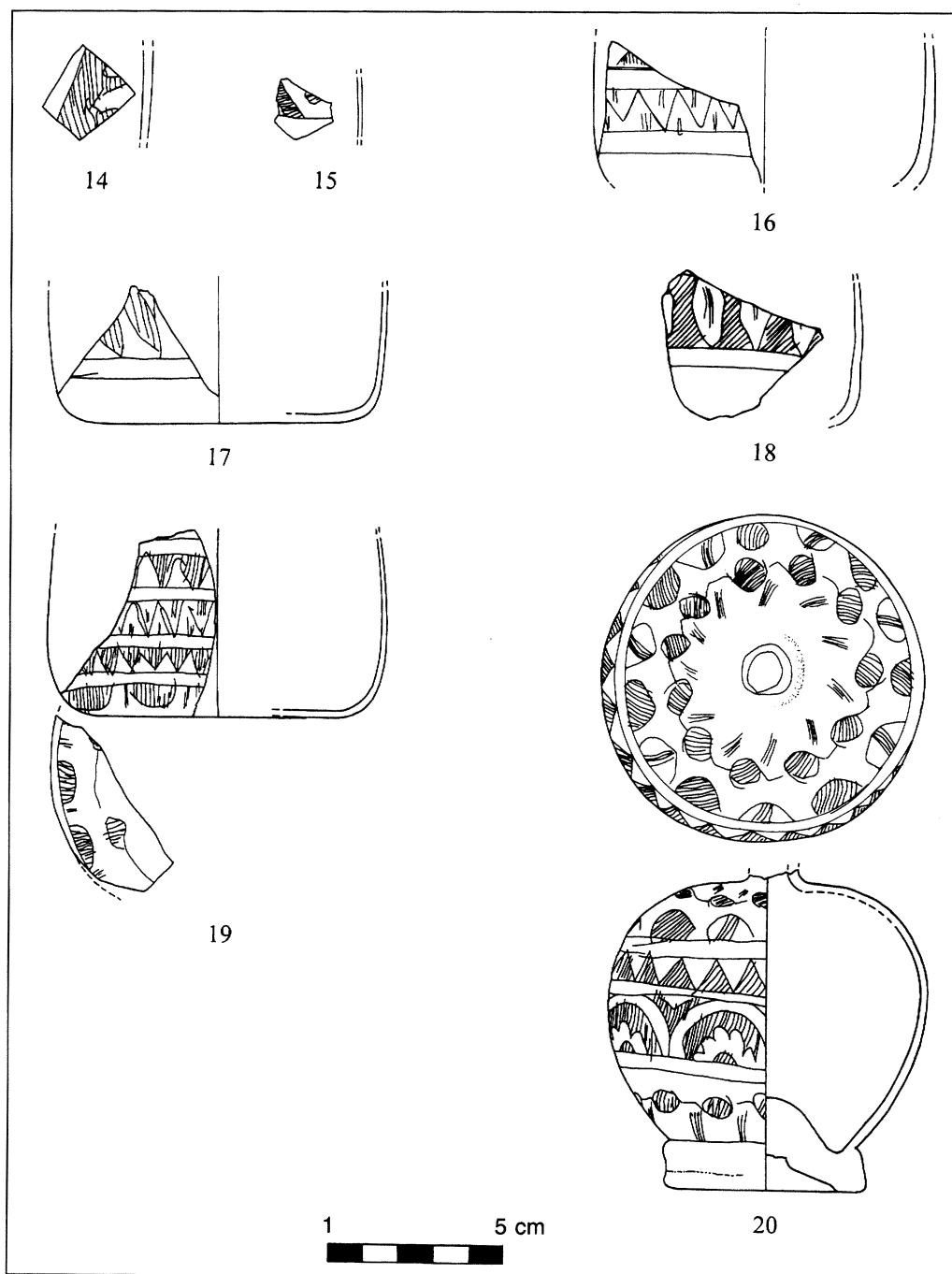
(eighth to ninth centuries). A unique, large deep glass bowl with two ledge handles in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (Kröger 1984: 169–70) is the best example of the type and illustrates the connections both in shape and decoration among incised glass, steatite, and clay bowls. This decoration exemplifies an affinity among vessels made from different materials in the early Islamic period. This phenomenon can be seen also among glass, ivory, and metal vessels, and even between millefiori and textiles (Hasson 1979: 18–19, 22–34).

### *Incised Glass Vessels*

Three types of incised glass vessels are known:

1. Open vessels that can appear in two types: deep bowls and beakers with straight or rounded walls, which have been discovered at Bet Shean, Fustāt, and Tulūl al-Uḥaiḍir; and large shallow bowls or plates, examples of which are known from Nishapur, China, and Aqaba (including two plates in the Smith Collection and two plates published by Lamm [1929–1930: pl. 50:6–7]). Both types were discovered at Samarra.
2. Bottles: one bottle was found at Bet Shean and one fragment was discovered at Samarra. Five other published jugs and bottles are in museums and private collections.
3. Goblet: one such vessel is known and is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

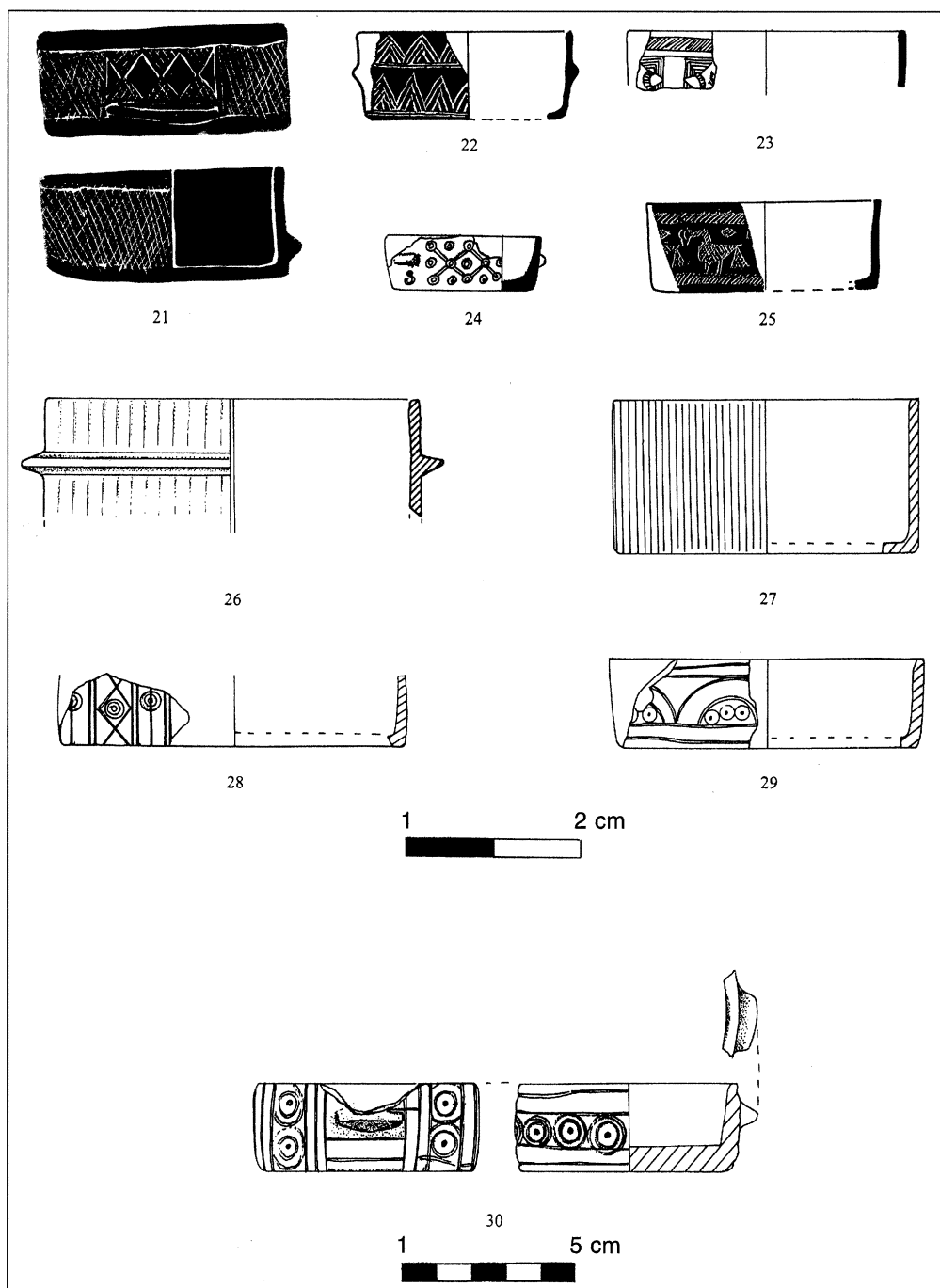
Where were these incised vessels manufactured? According to Lamm, who published the glass from Samarra, there are three possibilities: Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Iran is not considered a possibility even though one sherd of the ninth century was discovered at Susa (Lamm 1928: 79–82; Lamm 1935: 12). In Lamm's opinion, the incised glass from Samarra originated in Egypt; a fragment found in Egypt and dated to the seventh–eighth centuries (the transition from the early periods to the Islamic period) provides the evidence for this view. Elsewhere, though, he thought it impossible that the finds from Samarra and Susa had originated in Egypt (Lamm 1929–1930: 139–41). In his article on the glass from Susa he noted that incised glass vessels had been discovered at Samarra, in the Caucasus, and in Egypt. Although such vessels were made in Egypt, they were also made in Mesopotamia (Lamm 1931: 366). In Whitcomb's opinion the shallow plate found at Aqaba is probably of Egyptian manufacture (Whitcomb 1987: 264). Yet another origin is suggested for the beaker found at Pella: according to O'Hea [1992: 259], this vessel was im-



**Fig. 4.** Abbasid-Fatimid incised glass vessels from Bet Shean. Cat. nos. 14–19: Beakers and bowls; 20: bottle.

ported from Syria or Mesopotamia. Jiayao (1991: 123–24) believes that the six plates found in the crypt of the Famen Temple in China were imported from Nishapur, based on the decorative similarities between the plates from both sites. Kröger (1995: 117)

proposes that since incised glass has been found in every major center, it is likely that this kind of vessel was made in various local glassmaking houses. He therefore concludes that there is no obvious reason why the two Nishapur plates should not have been



**Fig. 5.** From Bet Shean. Cat. nos. 21–25: Clay bowls; 26–30: steatite bowls with geometric designs.

manufactured at Nishapur. Yet a comparison of these two plates to the few sherds of luster pottery that were found at Nishapur but were not made in this city led Kröger to believe that the two incised glass plates and the luster pottery were imported from Iraq, and the plates from China are the proof that such vessels

were exported. Still, Charleston (1989: 302) argues that the designs of the Nishapur plates did imitate the motifs of Mesopotamian luster ware, but also have strong affinities with the wall paintings found at Nishapur itself; he therefore thinks that these plates have a Persian origin.



**Fig. 6.** Photos of cat. nos. 22–25 (see also fig. 5:22–25) (photographs not to scale).

In the Umayyad period incised vessels are known only from Bet Shean and Susa. By contrast, relatively large numbers of incised vessels from the Abbasid–Fatimid periods were discovered at Bet Shean, Samarra, and Fustāt. Since these vessels differ in their decoration, they were probably made in different workshops. It may be that the vessels found at Bet Shean were made at this site or nearby, although no evidence for a glass factory has been found at Bet Shean (at least in the areas excavated by the Hebrew University and the Israel Antiquities Authority). The vessels from Samarra were made in that city or at

some other place in Iraq, and the vessels from Fustāt were manufactured there or at another site in Egypt. The few vessels from Nessana and al-Ṭūr, and perhaps also from Manda, probably originated in Egypt. The shape of the large, shallow bowl from Aqaba, which is totally different from the Fustāt deep bowls and beakers, may indicate that it was made in another workshop, not in Egypt but perhaps in the same workshop where the Nishapur and China plates were manufactured. The plates discovered in Nishapur and China and the few sherds from Susa apparently were made in Iran; their decoration is different from that



## CATALOG

<i>Number/Location</i>	<i>Locus</i>	<i>Registration number</i>	<i>Color</i>
1 Valley Street	64677	646071/1	Olive
2 Umayyad Shopping Street	746	7629/3	Dark blue
3 Central Monument	566	8518	Dark blue
4 Abbasid quarter	74510	745428/1	Dark blue
5 Abbasid quarter	84502	845030/3	Dark blue
6 Northwest Street	06006	060050	Dark blue
7 Temple	860	10739/2	Yellowish green
8 Abbasid quarter	94640	945914/4	Yellowish green
9 Nymphaeum	613	15627/1	Dark blue
10 Valley Street	64567	646427	Dark blue
11 Abbasid quarter	94555	945431/2	Dark blue
12 Abbasid quarter	04693	046142/1	Olive
13 Central Monument	590	6223/2	Dark blue
14 Central Monument	594	6263/1	Dark blue
15 Eastern bathhouse	25529	255237	Dark blue
16 Central Monument	590	6223/1	Yellowish brown
17 Umayyad Shopping Street	950	13513/2	Dark purple
18 Valley Street	64711	745766/1	Yellowish green
19 Eastern bathhouse	15513	155183/1	Dark blue
20 Amphitheater	260	6857	Dark blue
21 Amphitheater	281	2970	Dark gray clay, incisions filled in with white
22 Temple	918	11490/2	Dark gray clay, incisions filled in with white
23 Temple	95060	950329	Dark gray clay, incisions filled in with white
24 Northwest Street	36266	360991	Dark gray clay, incisions filled in with white
25 Temple	918	11490/1	Dark gray clay, incisions filled in with white
26 Temple	75004	750607	Steatite
27 Temple	05016	050025	Steatite
28 Amphitheater	99030	990181	Steatite
29 Amphitheater	09091	091495	Steatite
30 Amphitheater	29087	290745	Steatite

of the vessels found at Samarra, and may indicate that they were made in different workshops. On the other hand, the small sherd found at Nippur is decorated with a guilloche pattern, a decoration that appears on the plates found in Nishapur and China. Did they have the same origin or is the similarity a coincidence? The find from Tulūl al-Uḥaiḍir is similar to the find from Samarra. Only one sherd has been published from al-Mina, while three bowls and one jug are said to come from Raqqa; unfortunately, no glass vessel found during excavations at Raqqa has been published (only glass furnaces [Henderson 1996]). If incised vessels were discovered there, they might provide evidence that incised vessels were manufactured in Syria. It should be noted that no incised vessels were found at Hama. At other places where only one glass sherd was discovered—e.g., at Hammat Gader, Pella, Corinth, and Dvin—the glass vessel was probably an import.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, based on the shapes and decorations of the published vessels, it seems likely that the incised vessels found at the above-mentioned sites were made in more than one workshop. The fact that bottles were discovered at Bet Shean and Samarra, but not at Fustāt, supports the proposal that there were other glass production centers, outside Egypt. Another kind of decorated vessel found at Bet Shean also supports this proposal: pinch-decorated vessels are very common at this site; most of them are beakers and bowls, while a few are bottles (of which only the decorated necks are preserved). Pinch-decorated bottles were not discovered at Fustāt or at any other published site. These vessels were apparently made at Bet Shean or nearby, although, as noted above, no evidence for a glass factory was found. The fact that at Bet Shean only deep bowls

and beakers were found, while at Nishapur and China only shallow plates decorated with totally different decorations were discovered, strengthens the proposal that they were not made in one workshop.

Since many excavated sites from the various Islamic periods are still not published, and glass workshops have not been discovered at Bet Shean or at

any other site where incised vessels have been found, it is difficult to prove the above-mentioned proposal. The few bottles and jugs and the one goblet presented an opportunity for decoration, but such vessels are rarer than the more common and widespread beakers, bowls, and plates.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*luk Periods at Bet Shean (7th–14th Centuries C.E.)* (Hebrew with English summary), submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University in 1998.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Two expeditions are excavating at Bet Shean: the Hebrew University expedition headed by Gideon Foerster and Yoram Tsafrir, and the expedition of the Israel Antiquities Authority directed by Rachel Bar-Nathan and Gabi Mazor. Thus far both expeditions have published only preliminary reports: Foerster and Tsafrir 1988; 1990; 1993; Tsafrir and Foerster 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1997. See there the additional bibliographies with publications relating to Bet Shean.

<sup>2</sup>Some vessels were published by Lamm (1929–1930: 139–41). Two plates and one beaker are in the Smith Collection (Corning Museum of Glass 1957, nos. 604–606); beaker 606 was also published by Harden (1971: 94, pl.

10C). Three bowls said to come from Raqqa are in the National Museum of Syria in Damascus (al-ʿUsh 1971). A beaker, said to come from Tulūl al-Uḥaydir and now in the Iraq National Museum, is decorated with geometric and floral designs and with a Kufic inscription, only a small part of which is preserved (Abdul Khaliq 1973: 210, fig. 4). Some vessels are in the Benaki Museum (Clairmont 1977: 75–77) and in the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne (Rütti 1981: 134, nos. 586–87). A large deep bowl is in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (Kröger 1984: 169–70), and one beaker is in the David Collection (Folsach 1990: 140, no. 212).

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